THE BAPS TEMPLE CASE:

Forced Labor, Caste Exploitation, and the Diaspora

01. Background of the BAPS case

On Tuesday, May 11th, 2021, the BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardam in Robbinsville NJ was raided by agents from the FBI, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and the U.S. Department of Labor. BAPS (Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan) is one of the largest internationally known sects of Hinduism. It maintains over 3,850 temples and cultural centers around the world, with the Robbinsville Akshardam being the largest Hindu temple outside of India. The raid, which drew condemnation from Hindu Diaspora Groups such as Hindu American Foundation (HAF) and the United States branch of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, followed claims of forced labor, wage theft, and violations of immigration law by Temple construction workers.

The FBI raids the BAPS temple in Robbinsville, NJ

The official complaint alleged that around 200 workers were lured from India, had their passports confiscated immediately upon entry, and were confined to the Temple construction site monitored by BAPS security personnel and around 50 cameras, unable to leave the premises unless accompanied by a BAPS overseer. The complaint also alleges that workers were paid $1.20 an hour while forced to work around 87 hours a week doing backbreaking manual labor, including operating heavy machinery, digging ditches, and lifting/carving heavy stones. Workers were had their pay docked for infractions such as speaking to Temple volunteers and visitors. $400 of their $450 monthly salary was deposited to their bank accounts directly in India, further confining them to the construction site. Workers were denied any medical care, resulting in the death of two workers, Ramesh Meena and Devi Lal. The vast majority of the workers were from the Dalit community, also known as “the untouchables” to many in the West, the lowest rung in the Hindu caste hierarchy located below or outside the caste system.

The upper caste Indian diaspora continues to oppose anti-caste organizing in the United States with the same vehemence as they do in India. The California Caste discrimination bill faced immense opposition from right wing Hindu groups who argued that the bill represented an institutionalized form of Hinduphobia. These same groups are organizing in support of BAPS today. This structure of right wing caste hierarchy in the diaspora is a key factor underlying the presence of forced labor in Robbinsville. The results of the Equality Labs survey point to a deep mindset of acceptance that has allowed for widespread silence regarding the issue amongst the South Asian diaspora.

As South Asians living in the United States, we have a duty to combat this regressive structure which continues to reinforce a mindset of exploitation in our communities. Our collective belief in this backward feudal system has allowed us to oppress our own people for the benefit of Imperialism, Brahmanism, and White Supremacy. The fight against forced labor, colonialism, and Hindutva is incomplete without our commitment to annihilating caste.

Jai Bhim. Lal Salam.

05. Additional Resources

Indian Stone Workers Alliance of America: *iswaa.com*

Behind BAPS: *behindbaps.com*

Dalit Solidarity Forum Letter of Support: *bit.ly/dalitsolidarityletter*

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In the U.S., the majority of the South Asian diaspora is from dominant caste backgrounds. In the early 20th century, Bhagat Singh Thind, a dominant caste Punjabi migrant in the United States, unsuccessfully attempted to petition the Supreme Court for his citizenship on the grounds that he was "white." During his court case, Thind argued that his high caste status sustained through centuries of endogamy, along with his own aversion to marrying a low caste woman, proved that he was "aryan" and racially more similar to white Americans than to the indigenous inhabitants of the subcontinent. Some scholars, such as Anand Teltumbde, have observed a similar mindset among the Gujarati Bania diaspora in East Africa, recreating structures of caste with indigenous Black Africans in countries such as Kenya and Uganda.

A 2016 survey by the anti-caste NGO Equality Labs analyzed caste throughout the South Asian diaspora in the United States. They found widespread caste discrimination across South Asian diaspora communities in marriage, religious spaces, food preferences, and social isolation. Respondents reported facing immense harassment and shaming from members of the South Asian community, with many individuals opting to either hide their identity through changing their legal surname. This discrimination culminated in a lawsuit in 2020 in which the California Civil Rights department sued Cisco Systems over discrimination faced by a Dalit engineer. The engineer reported workplace harassment, caste-based insults, and lowered advancement opportunities. Though the charges were dropped in 2023, a civil suit continues.

HINDUS TOO BRUNETTE TO VOTE HERE

THE PROBLEM.

A 1923 news article covering Bhagat Singh Thind's case

Ramesh Meena (left) and Devi Lal (right), two workers who died from silicosis they contracted while working at the Robbinsville BAPS temple

The U.S. Department of Justice closed its official probe into the BAPS temple on September 18th, 2025, possibly due to pressure from Hindu diaspora groups and BAPS themselves, which retains a considerable amount of political influence within India and among the Hindu diaspora. BAPS is known for maintaining a close relationship with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who enjoys a filial relationship with the current head of the organization, Mahant Swami. Additionally, Modi reportedly gave a eulogy at the funeral of the former head of the organization, Pramukh Swami, referring to him as his mentor and "father". During his tenure as Chief Minister of Gujarat, Modi admitted that Pramukh Swami would go as far as to instruct him as to what to and not to say during his speeches.

Despite their painstaking labor which was critical to the construction of the Temple, almost none of the workers were part of the BAPS religious community. This fact is a direct violation of their R-1 visas, which are meant for members of a sponsoring religious organization of their same denomination, such as priests, ministers, or those with specific religious vocations. BAPS told immigration authorities that the workers were volunteers, despite banning workers from interacting with actual temple volunteers. This dynamic is a prime example of caste exploitation, especially as it exists in diaspora.

Caste explains why BAPS construction workers can be both legally considered "Hindus," yet excluded from the BAPS religious community. Caste explains why BAPS, which preaches "social service" and "unity" can so callously keep laborers in conditions which amount to modern day slavery. Caste explains why news of the workers' complaint did not spark outrage or condemnation from other Hindu religious organizations or temples, or from influential Hindu diaspora groups. Caste explains why these organizations largely ignored or dismissed the allegations as baseless and "Hinduphobic." Caste is the critical link within the dynamics of the labor supply chain involved in temple construction, from Rajasthan and Gujarat all the way to New Jersey.

02. The Temple Construction Industry, The Silicosis Epidemic, and Caste

Stone workers in the BAPS temple in Robbinsville, NJ

Hindu religious organizations throughout India, including BAPS, largely source temple construction labor from Rajasthan, a state in northen India, specifically from the Towns of Sirohi and Pindwara. The majority of the artisans involved in the temple construction industry–both in Rajasthan and throughout India–are Dalit or Adivasi (members of scheduled tribes, also excluded from and considered below the Caste system). Importantly, this phenomenon is not historic but a more recent shift of the last few decades.

Advocates from Women Against Sexual Slavery (WASS) raise awareness for Lakireddy Bali Reddy's sex trafficking ring

04. Caste Exploitation and the Diaspora

Indian sociologist S.V. Ketkar once commented that “If Hindus migrate to other regions of the earth, Indian caste would become a world problem.” As the global South Asian diaspora skyrockets in prominence and in population, Ketkar has only been vindicated.

From 1975-2000, Lakireddy Bali Reddy, the second largest landlord in Berkeley, California, operated a major sex trafficking ring in the state. Bali Reddy used his caste and social position to traffic around 100 people, mostly Dalit women from the village of Velvadam, to work in the US as his businesses and to be his personal sex slaves. Later investigations revealed how Reddy used caste to exploit the economic precarity of the victims' situations, threaten, isolate, and intimidate them even in the United States.

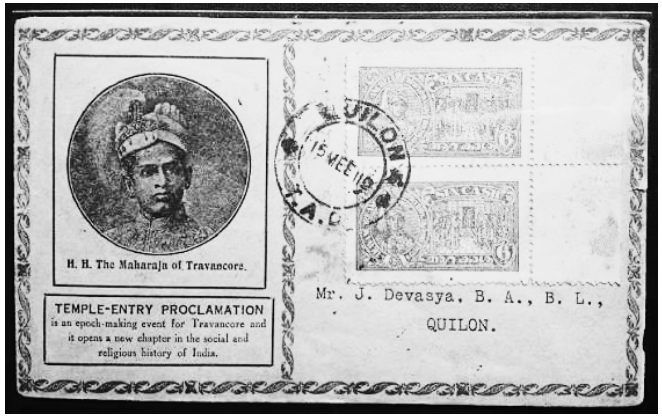
The continuance of caste dynamics and exploitation within the South Asian diaspora has historically relied on whether there remains a material incentive to sustain it. M.K. Gandhi famously distanced the struggle of upper caste “Passenger Indians” from indentured Indian labor during his initial campaigns against the racist apartheid “pass laws” in South Africa. Despite this, the majority of the Indian diaspora in South Africa, which were from oppressed caste backgrounds, intermarried, slowly dissipating (yet not annihilating) the system of social stratification. A similar dynamic emerges among the Tamil diaspora in Malaysia and the Indian diaspora in the Caribbean.

Around 80% of dalits live in rural areas, with the vast majority working as either marginal farmers or landless rural laborers. Despite making up 18.5% of India's population, Dalits only own 9.2% of the land. 92% of these landownings are less than 2 hectares. The 2011 Census of India revealed that around 71% of Dalits are landless laborers, with 58.4% of rural Dalits owning no land at all. In key agricultural states in India such as Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu, it is not uncommon to find districts where over 90% of Dalits are agricultural laborers. Dalit scholar Suraj Yengde notes that in Haryana, Punjab, and Bihar, 85% of Dalits depend on landlords for survival. In Haryana specifically, Dalits make up around 22.5% of the population yet only own 1.29% of the land. This dynamic has driven the growth of a (technically illegal) system of debt bondage. Around 8-11 million debt bonded laborers live in India alone, excluding other South Asian countries where the practice remains common. Anti Slavery International estimates that across the subcontinent over 90% of debt bonded laborers come from Dalit or other marginalized groups.

Villagers in the wake of the Laxmanpur Bathe massacre in 1997

This precarious land/labor discrepancy has been a root cause of the phenomenon of post independence caste atrocities, such as Kilvenmani (1968), Karamchedu (1985), Laxmanpur Bathe (1997), and Khairlanji (2006). The majority of this violence has sprung from existing disputes over land, water, and labor. Upper caste landowning communities commonly respond to the perceived threat of Dalit assertion to land, labor rights, and dignity with sexual violence and mass killings. The transformation of Dalits into landless laborers is the underlying cause of their entry into fields like stone working.

Dalits have historically been considered ritually impure and were banned from entering temples in most of India until several major Temple Entry proclamations were signed prior to Indian Independence, including in the princely state of Travancore (1936), in the Madras Presidency (1947), and in Bombay (1947). Each of these received immense pushback and often escalated into violent conflict after being passed into law. One of the Hindu religious sects that was well-known for opposing the legislation was BAPS, who in 1948 filed a suit against the president of the Maha Gujarat Dalit Sangh that prevented them from entering the BAPS temple in Ahmedabad. The BAPS organization went as far as to claim that they represented a distinct religious sect with no association with Hinduism in order to evade the Bombay Harijan Temple Entry Act of 1947.


H. H. The Maharaja of Travancore.
TEMPLE-ENTRY PROCLAMATION
is an epoch-making event for Travancore and it opens a new chapter in the social and religious history of India.
Mr. J. Devasya, B. A., B. L.,
QUILON.

A postcard memorializing the Travancore Temple Entry Proclamation

Temple construction has traditionally been the domain of Sompura Brahmins, once tasked with the prestigious and heavily guarded task of stone carving in temples. However, in the past few decades, advances in technology and a recent boom in temple construction have resulted in the introduction of machinery such as stone cutters and drills, alongside expectations for faster turnover times. Subsequently, Dalits became the bulk of a now hyper-exploited and "expendable" labor force, with Sompura Brahmins largely functioning as intermediaries for religious trusts and "advisors" to temple construction. Now, Sompura Brahmins usually come into stone cutting factories only once or twice a month to "supervise," for which they charge a hefty fee. Their "stamp of approval" is often unnecessary to the actual stone carving, however Temple's and religious trusts consider their involvement critical to the "purity" of the construction process, allowing Brahmins to retain a ceremonial chokehold over the industry.

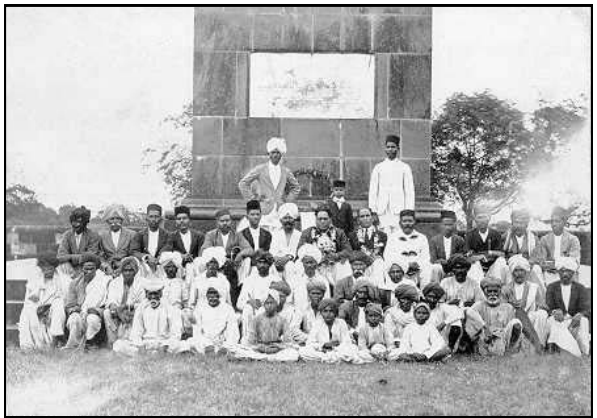
Lungs with severe silicosis

The workers' tools release near-deadly silica particles during the process of carving the pink and white stone often utilized in temple construction. Prolonged exposure to silica, especially without proper protection, leads to the development of a deadly disease known as **silicosis**, an irreversible lung disease which causes severe scarring and inflammation and can be fatal. Various research, along with screening efforts by the local stoneworkers union, Pathar Ghadai Mazdoor Suraksha Sangh (PGMSS), reveals that between 30-40% of workers in Pindwara and Sirohi have silicosis, with hundreds of lives lost to the disease in the last few years. Rajasthan has the highest rates of silicosis in India, particularly in the Sirohi district due to the stone carving industry. In 2023, Soochna evam Rozgar Adhikar Abhiyan, or Information and Employment Rights Campaign, successfully advocated for the government of Rajasthan to release funds to support silicosis payments in the state.

PGMSS asserts that caste is apparent in every aspect of the supply chain–they found that not a single Adivasi worker has moved beyond the rank of a contractor. Additionally, the Union states that Sompura Brahmins and Temple Trustees are fully aware of the silicosis epidemic and have done nothing to prevent it despite numerous meetings with worker representatives. The Brahmin-dominated supply chain has resulted in the economic marginalization of factory owners, who are forced into increasingly hostile contracts with Sompura Brahmins in exchange for the Brahmins' exorbitantly priced "approval." Members of different castes participate throughout the supply chain, including many Patels as contractors, but the Brahmins' oversight and influence has continually resulted in suppressed wages for workers and has made it extremely unprofitable for factory owners to invest in any form of safety equipment.

The advent of British Imperialism and capitalist social relations provided one of the most critical challenges to the caste system by threatening to uproot its material foundations in feudalism. In 1853, Karl Marx theorized that "modern industry, resulting from the railway system, will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labor, upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power." While ruthlessly exploiting the subcontinent, including killing millions in man-made famines and reinforcing the feudal zamindari system of land ownership (to grow cash crops), Imperialism did in some ways provide an escape for Dalits and other marginalized communities from the village "life world" of caste. Both the East India Company and the British Raj recruited Dalits into their respective armies, providing communities the ability to bear arms-a right which had been denied to them through centuries of upper caste hegemony. Furthermore, through military service, Dalits also received the right to education, which led to the emergence of the earliest urban Dalit middle class. The British, however, would soon slow their attempts to "disregard" feudal class hierarchies so as not to upset the "life world" of the people they were ruling over.

Marx's prediction that capitalism would destroy caste has not come to fruition. Today, caste survives, morphing into a new monster. According to Anand Teltumbde, prior to British Imperialism, the caste system relied upon relations of "interdependence.". This meant that since society had internalized the structure and performed pre-ordained socially necessary roles, there was no outward caste "enmity." The British wrecked these systems independence through their complete reworking of Indian labor supply chains and agriculture towards the interests of global capitalism. This process was furthered by post independence land reforms, the "Green Revolution," and the introduction of capitalism into the countryside, which created a class of rich landowning (often Shudra/OBC) peasantry. In the same stroke, these British and Indian agricultural reforms transformed the Dalits into the landless rural proletariat.

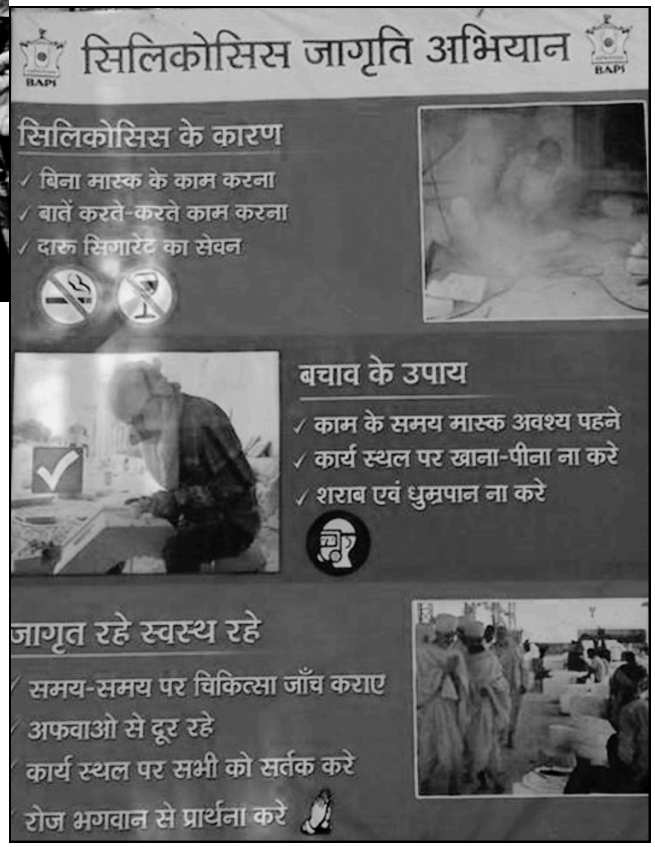


B. R. Ambedkar at a memorial to British East India Company soldiers in Koregaon, including a significant number of Mahar soldiers

Anti-caste scholar and activist Anand Teltumbde (center)

As agricultural surplus production grew, Brahmins, who maintained a monopoly over religious affairs and hegemony over ideology and knowledge systems, grew in terms of social importance. Teltumbde describes how Brahmins used their position to propagate religious texts and theories to reinforce this social structure. While religion drove the justification for the caste system, its spread was dependent on its proclivity to the type of feudalism that existed in the subcontinent. Caste maintained a complex system of labor exploitation that drove the growth of the various empires in the Indian subcontinent. It is due to South Asian society's material dependence on this system that despite the countless internal and external social/religious upheavals, from Buddhism, to the Bhakti Movement and Islam, alongside religious movements that explicitly challenged caste such as Sikhi and the Lingayat religion, the system has prevailed.

One study of stone workers in 2020 found that 72% of workers were not provided any PPE by quarry management. Rather than agreeing to negotiations with PGMSS for the provision of safety equipment, mill/factory owners alongside organizations like BAPS have, unsurprisingly decided to place the blame for the Silicosis epidemic on the workers themselves. They have decided to pass out Silicosis "awareness materials" such as the one shown below, chastising workers for their behavior and recommending solutions such as "praying to god everyday" and "avoiding alcohol". This institutionalized medical neglect was also present during the Temple construction in Robbinsville, where workers faced immediate deportation once being found with anything in as much as a cough.



A flyer about silicosis distributed to stone workers reads:

Causes:
- *Working without a mask*
- *Talking while working*
- *Cigarettes*

To protect from it:
- *Wear a mask while you work*
- *Don't eat or drink at work place*
- *Do not drink and smoke*

Stay aware and stay healthy:
- *Do a treatment check from time to time*
- *Stay away from rumors*
- *Alert everyone at your workplace*
- *Pray to god everyday*

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar

03. Origin of Caste Hierarchy

A 2020 study by the Dutch NGO *Arisa* found that over 60% of on stone workers in Rajasthan were Dalit and Adivasi. The majority of these workers lacked any contract and were instead paid on a piece rate basis below minimum wage. The same study found that debt bondage was rampant among both quarry workers and artisans, with lenders charging interest rates from 24-36% per year. Additionally, around 40% of workers in the study were found to be illiterate, making it increasingly difficult for them to keep track of their finances-a fact which factory owners and moneylenders alike take immense advantage of. This dynamic is representative of an immensely exploitative form of class based labor exploitation found throughout industries in the subcontinent, and its origins are centuries old. The underlying structure that explains the persistence of these precarious labor relations can be understood through caste, predating the advent of capitalism tracing back to earliest feudal civilizations in the subcontinent.

The origins of caste as a structure of exploitation are hotly contested. In his 1917 paper "Castes in India, Their Mechanism, Genesis, and Development," Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the foremost figure in the Dalit movement, termed caste an "enclosed class" which maintains itself primarily through a system of forced endogamy. Marxist Ambedkarite scholar Anand Teltumbde describes caste as the "life-world" of people in the Indian subcontinent "for more than two millenia." Ambedkar argues that ancient South Asian (he uses the term "Indian") society was already divided into classes. Vedic Aryan texts describe these classes as four varnas: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. According to Ambedkar, Brahmins, the educated priestly class at the top of the hierarchy, sought to close themselves off from the rest of society through the superimposition of endogamy onto the tribal customs of exogamy. This was likely in order to protect social prestige and class position.

This endogamy, characteristically "unnatural", was maintained through intensifying patriarchal practices to curb the "problem" of "surplus" women, such as Sati (the burning of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre), and child marriage. Ambedkar asserts that endogamy spread across the caste hierarchy through a process of imitation of Brahmin practices, where "Some closed the door...others found it closed against them." The internal logic of this system eventually resulted in constant excommunication, leading to the splintering of "varnas" into hundreds of "jatis" (castes) that are found throughout the subcontinent to this day. Later, complex systems of religious thought and philosophy were created to justify the already existing cultural practices.

Critically, Ambedkar was one of the first to study class struggle as an origin point of the caste system and subsequently of patriarchy. His analysis remains groundbreaking for its assertion of caste as a system rather than an isolated mindset which can be combatted through ideology and religious reform. Later scholars expand on Ambedkar's thesis by analyzing the material conditions that perpetuate caste by way of labor exploitation. Anand Teltumbde asserts in his paper "Caste and Class: Achilles' Heel of the Indian Revolution" that the system was enabled by the emergence of feudal structures in India, which did not require settled tribal communities to give up their identities (later understood as Jatis) due to the unique agricultural conditions of the subcontinent. These identities were subsumed by the Varna system created by Vedic Aryans who had begun to enter the subcontinent.

A protest for Dalit rights in India in 2014